

YAKSHINI AND THE FANGS OF DOOM

By Steve Kaye

A mythical creature haunts the wild jungles of India. A fleeting beauty that rises to challenge every terrifying danger - protector of sacred jungle ways. Into her jungle comes a mysterious predator whose deadly fangs strike horrible death!

1. Jungle Terror

THE SCENT OF FEAR saturated the fetid jungle air, its cloying sourness seeping into every leaf, every clump of moss, every rotting tree.

Breath – heavy, ragged, frantic – echoed in the dimly lit forest.

Two Onge tribesmen – boys, really – crashed heedlessly through the underbrush, sightless with near-paralyzing terror. They plunged headlong, mindless of whipping branches or jagged rocks. Their feet became bloody, pulpy things, adding to the air a coppery tang that mixed with the sour

smell of fear. The thing that pursued them neared.

Panic had overtaken the boys. They ran aimlessly even though they sought their village. Safety lay there. Hunters with spears, with arrows, with knives. Men. Their fathers, who would kill the thing that pursued them.

But in their panic they had forgotten how to find their village. A place they had known for all their lives had suddenly become lost to them, invisible



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in the murky jungle. They smelled no cook fires, heard no distant laughter. They only heard the crack of a twig, the brush of a branch as the thing

One boy screamed just as another scream rumbled through the jungle. A horrible sound that meant death. The boy tumbled, cracking his head on a



neared.

It had toyed with them, let a chase be led. Now its darkness loomed behind them. A quick glance thrown over bleeding shoulders. A black thing behind them, gliding through the jungle. A black thing with coal-black eyes. Eyes that glowed.

dead stump. Pausing only a moment, the other ran off, secretly grateful he might now escape.

Before him, though, a white mist arose so suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. Yet another scream ignited the jungle as the mist rose up off the ground and soared over the boy's head.

The boy turned and saw the white mist and the black pursuer crash in mid-air. Mute with terror, the boy covered his ears against the shrieking sound of the two phantoms as they clashed furiously.

Stumbling, the boy turned and ran for home.

Behind him, unseen as he ran, a slender hand rose up out of the white mist, its fist wrapped tight around an asidhenuka. The hand plunged, driving the curved blade of the Hindu dagger into the black thing. A final screech sliced the night air ... then silence.

Now still, the flowing white mist settled to reveal the form of a woman enshrouded with strips of gauzy white fabric. She turned to look after the boy who ran. A white gauzy mask covered icy blue eyes which peaked out through slits. Yellow hair, almost white, flowed back from her brow and mingled with the strips of gauze. Every move stirred just enough wind to set her costume to flowing.

She turned to the black thing on the ground, now dead. A panther. It had only been hungry and the foolish boys had seemed to be a handy meal.

The woman laid a gentle hand on the creature then removed her dagger with a fierce tug. In the deep silence of the jungle the mournful trumpet call of nearby elephants could be heard echoing in the gloom.

"Come on out, Avilash," she said. "No need to hide any longer."

A wiry Onge native stepped from the bush, his naked body covered only in a short loin wrap of colorful cloth and

a thin red headband. His brown body sagged with age, his dark eyes spoke of many seasons in the jungle.

"The boy," he said in his native tongue, "needs medical attention, Yakshini."

The woman rose to her full height on long, naked legs as white as the moonlight sifting through the jungle canopy. The diaphanous jumble of white strips of cloth flowed off her, covering her loins and breasts but leaving bare her arms and well-toned midriff.

"I will take him to Khanna," she told Avilash. "There's an English doctor who will help."

"No, Yakshini. He needs his people. He will recover."

"Then go, friend. And thank you for your summons. Perhaps now the jungle terrors will end."

The old Onge shook his head. "No, Yakshini. These two were not meant for the sanpa killer. The panther struck for food. Sanpa is evil. The Onge are cursed."

The old Onge shivered then moved to the boy, still unconscious in the brush. Scooping up the youth in a swift, casual motion, Avilash turned and pressed into the shadowed jungle. In moments he was gone from sight.

Yakshini paused over the dead panther, saddened. Such nobility, strength, she thought. Yakshini were guardians of the ancient treasures of India. If not a treasure, then what were the panthers? The land, so teeming with life, so full and rich, was a trea-

sure unto itself. The Onge kept that trust as well, guardians of a sacred way of life, too fast disappearing with the encroachment of civilization.

Turning, Yakshini disappeared into the jungle. Swift and sure steps took her over rocks and fallen limbs, and past the many dangers of the jungle. The British outpost of Khanna lay several miles away, but the distance meant nothing to Yakshini. When her path was blocked she launched up into the trees and scurried along branches mimicking the tiny langur monkeys. When the trees ended she raced on foot across the tall grass as fast as the deer.

As she neared Khanna, she saw the glow of lamplight from the outpost. A small, open fort lay at the center of Khanna. Surrounding it were other buildings – a small mission, a trader's outpost, Dr. Frost's house and clinic, and more. People always followed the army, no matter how small the force.

Yakshini slipped up to the main building of the fort where Captain Raymond J. Pettemayne commanded his 120 men. Beyond the company headquarters was a modest house, aglow with lamplight. Yakshini raced for it, silent as a whisper, avoiding the thick yellow light of the front porch. Two men stood on that porch, one in his starched, pressed uniform, the other in tall boots, jodhpurs, and a light, airy shirt.

"Nonsense, man," the uniformed man was saying, "I'll hear nothing of it. You must come in."

Around the house, in the shadows,

an open window beckoned. Yakshini leapt for it and slipped inside the house. Darkness enveloped her. With cat's eyes, she navigated flawlessly to a closet door across the room. Before she could open it, the door to the room opened, knifing yellow light across the floor.

In the doorway an old woman gasped.

Yakshini reached out, cupping the woman's mouth, and dragging her inside.

"Do not scream, Chakara. It is me."

"Mistress Millicent?"

Yakshini released the woman then found a lamp and lit it. Bathed in light, Yakshini removed her costume. Quickly, she took clothes from the closet and slipped into them. With a few practiced strokes of a brush, a twirl, and placement of a heavy comb, Yakshini transformed herself into a proper British lady, Millicent Pettemayne.

"Mistress, you frighten me every time you go out adventuring."

"Dear Chakara," Millicent said with a pleasant laugh. "You must some day get used to my comings and goings."

"Are the jungle terrors over, Mistress? Are we safe?"

Frustration played on the Millicent's face. "No, Chakara. Not yet. But quickly, tell me, who is with my brother?"

"I do not know. An old friend it seems."

Raymond had not mentioned that morning at breakfast a visitor would

arrive. For some reason this gave her a sense of foreboding.

"I should get out there and greet our guest before my brother wonders what-ever became of me."

The old woman smiled – a sly thing that showed off her missing teeth. "He was told you came to rest a headache."

Millicent gave Chakara a gentle hug. "Ever protective. What would I do without you?"

Stepping into the main room, Millicent saw the uniformed man, her brother, turn toward her. Quite dashing in his pressed red uniform, he presented a strong and capable figure. His rugged face beamed proudly at her entrance. With their parents so long departed, Raymond had always been both brother and father to her.

The other man, neatly attired in classical adventuring costume, was slightly taller than Raymond but not as rugged. His fair features and sunbleached hair gave the impression of a man of leisure, not one to go adventuring into the jungles of the world.

He, too, beamed as Millicent entered the room.

Millicent stepped over to her brother, gently kissing his cheek, one hand lightly on his arm. "Forgive me. I did not know we had a guest."

Her manner was sweet, even a little coy, her words innocuous. But she watched the newcomer warily.

"No," the newcomer said. "Please forgive me for intruding unannounced."

If he saw Millicent's deep, apprais-

ing gaze, it did not register on his face. Unabashed, he let his own gaze drift over her leisurely. Millicent's lightly tanned skin fairly glowed, her face a radiant oval, her chin strong but soft. Her eyes, no longer masked, seemed to have darkened to a deep blue. Although covered in a long tan gingham dress, her feminine figure was impossible to disguise.

"Stuart Maxim, I'd like you to meet my sister, Millicent," Raymond said formally. Then, to Millicent, "He's an American."

Maxim moved a half step forward to take Millicent's outstretched hand. "A bit far from home, aren't you, Mr. Maxim?"

"As we all are, it seems."

For a moment Millicent thought he might actually try to kiss her hand, but a quick squeeze and a shake deterred him. His face crinkled, slightly puzzled at the girl's firm grasp.

"Not much in the States right now, I'm afraid. Our economy is quite anemic."

"The entire world is suffering, Mr. Maxim," Millicent said. "I fear we are heading for worse times yet."

Maxim smiled. "Not tonight I hope."

The man's easy manner was infectious. She found herself liking him, just a bit.

"Stuart's just arrived in Khanna. On his way to Delhi from China. I'm trying to persuade him to stay a while."

"Well, he can at least join us for our late supper," Millicent offered.

"Wild elephants could not take me

away tonight, Miss Pettemayne.”

Millicent had just turned to call for Chakara when a distant scream rolled in through the open windows on the soft night air. Pettemayne paused only a moment, listening, then ran for the door with Maxim behind him.

Outside, a uniformed private was just running up to the house.

“What is it, private?”

“Don’t know, sir. Just coming to get you. Sounds like it came from the edge of town.”

Millicent joined her brother at the door carrying a small medical bag.

“With this deuced business going on, Millicent, I want you to stay here.”

Without pausing to answer, Millicent pushed out the door and made for the edge of town. Face taut with frustration, Pettemayne followed and behind him ran Maxim and the private.

Several others in the settlement had heard the scream and had come into the street carrying rifles and oil lamps. They milled uncertainly. Millicent pushed through the crowd, senses keenly attuned to the smell of death.

“There!” she cried, pointing to a shadow slumped on the ground at the edge of the jungle. She raced for the fallen form, turned it. Ghastly horror had frozen on the dead man’s face – forever gripped in mortal terror, rigid in death.

“Millicent, be careful!” Pettemayne called as he hurried to his sister’s side. “The creature may still be about.”

Ignoring her brother, Millicent

pulled at the dead man’s hand, frozen at the side of his neck. Then she turned the corpse’s head. In the yellow glow of an oil lamp she saw two bloody marks on the side of his neck.

Millicent’s heart had suddenly become leaden. The dead man was not of the settlement. He was an Onge villager, and her friend. Avilash!

2. The Onge Curse Strikes!

MORE LANTERNLIGHT poured into the area. Pettemayne pulled Millicent to her feet, turned her away from the dead man. She moved as if under water. Avilash had never before ventured toward the outpost. He had come to see her, of that Millicent was certain. But what strange news had he tried to deliver?

“Did you know him?” Maxim asked, a touch of suspicion in his eyes.

No one could ever know the connection between Millicent and Avilash and his people. If they did, the secret of Yakshini would be revealed.

Millicent held up her hand, bloodied from touching Avilash’s ruined neck. She stared at it dumbly. Maxim’s demeanor softened. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and, gently holding the girl’s hand, wiped it clean. Millicent looked up at the man. She struggled to maintain an innocent façade, to keep the burning anger she felt buried.

“A horrible way to die,” she said, weakly.

"What did it?" the American asked.

"Cobras," Pettemayne said, spitting the word as if it were an oath. "Jungle's teaming with them. They've been striking constantly for a week now. Mostly the Onge villagers, they're about five miles inland. But I've lost two men as well. Beastly."

"I've heard of some jungle spirit," Maxim said. "Could this be his work?"

Pettemayne huffed. "Native superstition, my friend. There's nothing mystical about these deaths."

A gray-haired man with flowing mustaches came up to Millicent. He had a slight nervous tick of the eye that detracted hardly at all from the look of deep concern and kindness he wore.

"Dr. Frost," Millicent asked him, "is there nothing you can do for him?"

Shaking his head sadly, he said, "No my dear."

"This is madness!" cried a woman from the crowd, drawing all eyes to her. A plain woman in a worn, drab dress, she looked haggard and aged beyond her years. The wife of the local minister, Eloise Fernhagen spent many more hours caring for her husband and others at the outpost than she did on her own needs.

"Africa, South America, and now India," the woman said. "Every godforsaken land, and always death!"

Minister Fernhagen, a slight man, stood next to his wife, murmuring ineffective words of comfort. His plaintive features were pale in the moonlight and his dark eyes looked like black, cadaverous holes.

"It's the jungle, dear," he said. "A terrible tragedy, of course, but part of nature."

Eloise gave her husband a hot, contemptuous glare then turned and stalked off toward home.

"Difficult night for all of us, I should think," the minister lamely explained.

Simon Eldeman chuckled. "Nothing like for that guy," he said. "Those poor savages must be cursed!" Eldeman was the local trader, providing necessities and the rare luxuries so coveted in jungle settlements. He was a slovenly man, with a rough growth of beard, crooked teeth, and a rude manner. With Pettemayne's reluctant approval, Eldeman employed several of the garrisoned men, toughs who saw to it goods ordered in Delhi arrived in Khanna.

Minister Fernhagen stepped forward, tentatively. "Dr. Frost, we must do something with the poor fellow. I don't know his religion, of course, but certainly a few Christian words would not be inappropriate."

"I'll have the body taken to my office," Frost said. "We can send a messenger to the village in the morning for them to come retrieve him."

Pettemayne, the defacto leader of the community, nodded his agreement.

"Bit on the neck like that," Maxim said, "what was he doing? Crawling into the outpost?"

An uneasy silence settled over the group.

Millicent sloughed her loose dress with a violent action. Gentle Chakara, ensconced in the corner, gasped at the sudden movement. Millicent had come into the room deeply saddened, seemingly unable to even sit down by herself. Her brother had eased her to the bed then ordered Chakara to help her mistress.

"Never mind supper, dear. We'll fend for ourselves. You rest. Chakara can bring you something if you like."

Once alone, Millicent had discarded her oppressed demeanor as quickly as she had shucked her dress.

Startled, Chakara asked, "Are you well, Mistress?"

"I am heartbroken, Chakara," she said, climbing into her costume. "I had come to rely on Avilash. But I've no time to grieve. I must find his killer!"

Clad once again in the white, flowing raiment of Yakshini, Millicent climbed to the windowsill and flung herself into the night.

A damp mist had risen. It swirled at her ankles as she glided effortlessly through the shadows of the outpost.

The killer was in Khanna, of that Yakshini was certain. Earlier, she had seen no other tracks beside the body of Avilash. She had used her feigned shock at the discovery of the bloodied body to mask her quick but careful assessment of the murder scene. No one, she saw, had come near her friend in order to commit the murder.

And murder it was! Maxim was more right in his cavalier comment than he knew. Avilash had not been

crawling, and cobras rarely struck from trees. Cobras also never retreated until their work was complete. The killer snake would strike again and again, if need be, until the victim succumb. But Avilash had been struck only once.

There was a murderer loose – still in Khanna. The question of whom, and why they would strike Avilash, did not matter. Even the method of murder, still unfathomable to Yakshini, did not concern her. She would find the killer and destroy him.

Soundlessly, Yakshini slipped up beneath the open window of the main room to Dr. Frost's clinic. Frost had arranged Avilash's body on an examining table, draped a sheet over it. He was adjusting an overhead lamp as Yakshini peaked in through the window.

Frost's brow furrowed deeply as he caught sight of something. He leaned closer to the body, turning the head with one hand as he pulled the overhead lamp closer. After a moment, he reached out toward the corpse's neck.

The clinic door slapped open with a bang, jolting the doctor.

From the doorway, Simon Eldeman, the trader, said, "Sorry to burst in, Doc." The grim smile on his face told Frost the man was anything but sorry for the violent intrusion.

"What do you want?" Frost took the sheet in hand and pulled it up over Avilash's cold face.

"Just thought I'd offer to take word to the Onge. Goin' in-jungle tomorrow. I could take them word. Or maybe I

could take the body."

Outside the window, Yakshini tensed. Eldeman had aided no one since his arrival in Khanna. He was a man supremely capable of looking out only for himself. She wondered if the body would be delivered to the Onga and, if not, what purpose would it serve Eldeman.

"Thank you," Dr. Frost said, his eye twitching again. "Perhaps it would be best if they claimed the body. You can take word, though, that would be kind."

"Yeah. Sure."

Eldeman stood in the doorway for several moments, watching the twitch in Dr. Frost's eye. Then he laughed and closed the door.

The suspicious behavior of the trader piqued Yakshini's interest. She followed the portly man across the outpost to his store. The man clomped into the darkened building, passed through to the back, and lit a lantern. From a small window at the back of the cheap clapboard building, Yakshini watched Eldeman strip out of his cloths and sink into a ratty upholstered chair. From beneath his lumpy cot, the trader pulled a bottle of liquor and slowly began to work on it. Soon, the slovenly trader would asleep, passed out from the alcohol.

Across the compound a light came brightly to life, pulling at Yakshini's attention. It was a light from her own home. From the distant shadows, Yakshini watched as Maxim and Captain Pettemayne stepped out onto the porch. The two said some words then

shook hands. Maxim then stepped off the porch and made his way across the outpost toward the small mission at the edge of town.

Curious, Yakshini followed.

She watched as Maxim went to the door and was greeted by Minister Fernhagen. Unseen by the two men, yellow light knifed into the darkness from the back of the minister's home. A door had opened and now, Yakshini saw, a shadow blotted some of that light. The shadow, unrecognizable at this distance, remained for several long seconds and then vanished. Yakshini had taken a few steps toward the back of the house when the light vanished as well.

A new sound caught Yakshini's ear. She turned to see that Eloise Fernhagen had joined her husband at the door. There were a few pleasant words and then Maxim stepped into the house.

There were strange movements afoot tonight in Khanna. Too many mysteries for Yakshini to solve. She had one concern only: find Avilash's killer.

Turning, Yakshini ran for the spot where Avilash had fallen. The mist had thickened and now swirled about the girl as if she were in fact a wraith.

The murder ground had remained untouched. Yakshini studied it again, hoping for some clue. She stepped into the brush, examining as best she could by the pale moonlight for some indication to how Avilash had been murdered.

The crack of a twig alerted Yakshini

instantly. Her keen senses came immediately to life. Her sight was hampered by the dim moonlight, but her aural sense had located the sound in moments. Now, she smelled something – a tart, musky smell. A human smell.

Silently, Yakshini slipped deeper into the brush. Shadows folded over her. Concealed, she leapt up into the air, catching hold of a tree branch and lifting her lithe form off the ground. From there she moved instinctively higher, her flowing white costume like the rising jungle mist.

Yakshini made her way toward the sound of the cracking twig, but stopped as her jungle sense alerted to some hidden danger. Leaves rustled in the windless night.

Yakshini turned, moved away from the sound of rustling leaves. Then she saw a form in the night. It was dark and ill defined, but large and definitely a man.

Dropping from the tree, Yakshini stalked the form as some jungle cat. The man had no idea of his danger.

Something slithered around Yakshini's ankle and grabbed with a furious tug. Helpless, Yakshini swooped into the air by her leg, hung upside down, twisting.

In a sliver of moonlight, Yakshini saw the broad point of a spear racing toward as she swung uncontrollably – only a fraction of a moment from death.

3. Specters in the Night

ARCHING HER LITHE BODY, Yakshini spun on the rope that suspended her in mid-air and swung her toward her doom. In a heartbeat, her curved blade *asidhenuka* leapt into her hand. She stabbed down at the on-rushing spear, slicing off the deadly stone head of the thing just as it tore through the shroud of her costume.

She swung past the spear, anchored to a tree some five feet off the ground then grabbed at it as her pendulum movement brought her back.

Yakshini, so intent on the mysterious man-shadow in the brush, had stepped into one of the tiger traps encircling the outpost. But she had never known the traps to be outfitted with spears. Her brother insisted that the tigers be unharmed. He wanted them frightened of the outpost, reluctant to venture near, not dead.

Before Yakshini could extricate her ankle, something hard pounded out of the darkness and across her shoulder. Spinning, Yakshini saw the man-shadow, his darkened arm raised and unnaturally long and thick.

The arm swooped down as Yakshini arched her back away from the blow, but the long arm slammed with a wooden thud against her side. The man wielded a heavy club. He would kill her if she could not slip loose of the trap.

With a mighty effort, Yakshini swung her body back toward the spear just as another blow whistled past her.

She caught hold of the spear and yanked, but could not remove it.

Again the man-shadow swung his deadly club, narrowly missing Yakshini's head and splintering the end of the spear.

Yakshini grabbed hold of the tightly wedged spear again then shoved with powerful arms. She shot up into the air several feet. Flailing legs caught hold of a branch. Another blow of the man-shadow's club crashed into the tree limb as Yakshini righted herself and stood on the limb.

A quick tug of the rope about her ankle told her the amount of slack in the line.

Now she ran sure-footedly along the tree limb to its end. Confused in the darkness, the man-shadow turned to follow Yakshini. But the ghostly wraith did not seek escape.

At the end of the branch she threw herself into the air, holding the tiger trap rope close. At the end of its tether, it snapped back, pulling Yakshini with it.

A speeding bullet, Yakshini swung back toward the man-shadow. He saw her movement, heard the rush of the wind, and laughed. With raised club he waited to deliver the killing blow.

Then his blood froze as a whistling, high-pitched scream knifed through the night and into his heart. The jungle cry of the Yakshini, unnatural and eerie, seemed to come from everywhere at once as it echoed through the brush. For an instant, he stood motionless, trapped in his fear.

A second's pause was all Yakshini needed. With naked feet she caught hold of the man-shadow's head. Her speeding momentum took the man backward. He stumbled awkwardly, then lost his footing altogether when Yakshini unbunched her legs with a violent thrust. Thrown back, the man-shadow slammed into the broken spear, impaled through the neck.

Yakshini pulled herself back up to the branch above and slipped out of the rope's burning embrace. Her ankle swelling and raw, she alighted next to the dead man. In the dim light she saw he was one of her brother's soldiers. He wore a uniform, and his face seemed familiar. She had seen this man working for the trader, Edleman.

Night sounds of tiger growls and elephant trumpeting began to filter back into the jungle. A swift search of the dead man revealed no more information about him. Yet in a pocket lay a tiny carved figure that fairly glowed white in the dim moonlight. Its fine features were impossible to discern. Yakshini slipped it into the folds of her costume then turned away and let the jungle tend to the body.

The Onge tribe must learn of old Avilash's death. Into the brush Yakshini ran. So attuned to the jungle, darkness did not delay her. With sure strides she ran, and when she could not run, she took to the treetops and used the branches for her highway.

Outside the village a lone fire burned small in the night. A figure sat hunched over the flames, murmuring, eyes closed, at the junction of three faint footpaths. The smell of camphor bark burning filled the air. A gourd cup of yellowish ghee sat in the center of the fire.

"Om Aim Drim Mahamode Bhishani Dram Dram Svaha," the man by the fire said. The words came out in a rapid mantra that repeated itself endlessly.

Behind him a frail woman stood in the shadows, head bowed, hands held cupped in front of her. In her hands were strips of camphor bark. Her dress was simple and drab – an acolyte to an Onge shaman.

Yakshini dropped from the trees, placing the fire between her and the man.

"You are Bhupati, son of Avilash," Yakshini said.

The man scrambled to his feet, body tensed for action. His smooth broad chest was bare; his face round, strong, and proud. A streak of silver shot carelessly through his mane of thick, black hair. He wore a colorful wrap about his waist that caught the fire's hues. At his side was a long blade. One hand rested on the hilt of the weapon.

Although frightened, the woman in the shadows had not moved.

"My father spoke of you." His initial fear had faded quickly. Instead of a wraith, he saw a woman, powerful, lithe, and beautiful.

"You call to Yakshini for help."

"Not to you, woman, but to the spir-

its of my land. I call to Bhishani."

Yakshini straightened, more watchful of this man.

"Some have said Bhishani is abroad in this land. Terror is his power, and the Onge are filled with terror."

"Yes," Bhupati said. "So afraid that they will abandon their sacred trust to this land and leave it."

Leave! The Onge had been caretakers of this part of the jungle for as far back as anyone could remember.

"I must find something to combat the sanpa. The tribe will leave tomorrow, or perhaps the day after."

"Sanpa is not the killer, Bhupati. Man is doing this," Yakshini said, stepping around the fire. "A man I will find and kill. I will avenge the deaths of your tribesmen ... the death of your father." She told him of finding Avilash, of the marks on his neck.

Bhupati seemed to weaken for a moment then swelled with anger. "Bring him to me, Yakshini woman. It is for the son to avenge."

She stood close to Bhupati, looking up into deep dark eyes. She found herself reaching out to him, softly touching his shoulder. For a moment she thought of him as a man full grown, not the son of her dead friend.

"Your father wanted you to be the spiritual caretaker of the Onge. Their heart leader. That is why he taught you the ancient mantras. He did not want death to be your way."

"Death is the way of the jungle, Yakshini woman," he said.

They were only inches apart.

Bhupati reached up and gently caressed Yakshini's masked face as if to assure himself that she was real.

"The jungle is life," she said, a slight tremble in her voice. Wild emotions coursed through her.

"Only for the strong."

Abruptly, Bhupati sat down by the fire, crossed his legs, and prepared to resume his mantra. "I will find my father's killer, Yakshini woman, and show you that in the jungle only the strong survive."

Yakshini had just turned to leave when a wild cry broke the night. The acolyte, standing so silently in the shadows, screamed with utter terror and collapsed.

In an instant both Yakshini and Bhupati were at the woman's side. For a moment her glazed eyes looked up at the man. Fear turned to sorrow, as if she had seen something in her last moments of life. Then her eyes went dark.

Bhupati took a long, ragged breath. "Mother," he sighed.

The air beside Yakshini's ear cut with an angry buzz. Bhupati gasped and collapsed to the brush-softened ground. Yakshini whirled and to her horror saw blood welling up on the native's arm. The mysterious killer had struck again!

4. Dealers of Death

GROANING WITH FEAR AND pain, Bhupati slumped against a tree trunk. Shaking, he examined his

arm. A look of hatred and defiance swept across his broad, strong face. He glanced up at Yakshini, hopeful.

Whatever had struck Bhupati had not delivered its full measure. There was only one puncture, and it was not a deep one. A bubble of blood welled up and clung to the arm as if to protect it. Just above the wound Bhupati wore several traditional metal bands around his well-toned biceps. These bands had partly deflected the mysterious projectile.

Yakshini had her knife out and swept its razor sharp blade across the wound. Blood seeped out, but not quickly enough to rid Bhupati of the fast acting poison. Yakshini bent over the man's arm and began sucking at the wound, spitting the drawn blood to ground. She recoiled for a moment at the bitter taste streaming into her mouth. It was just not the coppery taste of blood, but something else, a hint of almonds.

After a few moments, she ran to the fire and grabbed up the gourd of heated ghee. She dripped the yellowish milk onto Bhupati's wound, washing away the blood. His breathing had become slightly ragged and his face had paled.

"You will be sick for a time," Yakshini told him, wrapping the wound in a poultice of camphor leaves and a paste made with the ghee and ash from the fire. "But you will not die"

He looked up at her, eyes glazing. "I must get back to my people," he said, breathlessly.

Yakshini nodded and hoisted the

now unconscious native onto her back. She grunted under his dead weight, shifting him to her shoulders. Then off she ran to the nearby Onge village.

An old woman was just waking to prepare for the day when Yakshini stepped into the village. Fear froze the old woman for a moment until she saw Bhupati slumped across Yakshini's shoulders. Instructions were spoken in haste, but the woman understood and promised to attend to the unconscious native who had been placed at her feet. When the old woman looked up again, Yakshini was gone.

Returning to the site of the attack, Yakshini used the light from the still burning fire to scout the area. She was certain the device employed to kill the acolyte and injure Bhupati must still be there. With great care, Yakshini pushed aside leaves and twigs, examining every inch of ground around the fire.

She had been looking at the device for several minutes before realizing its importance. Gingerly, she picked up a small strip of splintered bamboo that had been bent into a circle. The tips of the bamboo splinters were stained brownish-red. A small round rock lay beside the bamboo.

Yakshini took the strip of bamboo and wrapped it around the rock. Notches at each end of the strip formed a lock when brought together. The bamboo had delivered the poison; the rock had delivered the bamboo. What had propelled the rock, she did not

know. At least she knew now that her enemy no spirit. It was human.

A buzzing sound seemed to rise up out of nowhere, filling her senses. Small white spots danced before her eyes.

She stood and felt woozy.

The poison! she thought. She had tasted enough of it to affect her.

Yakshini felt a wave of panic sweep over her. She could not be caught out in the jungle unconscious. She must get home.

Gathering herself, Yakshini ran toward Khanna, her only thought to get home and receive the ministrations of faithful Chakara. Not a moment later, a shadow rose up in her path. It seemed to glow in the new dawn filtering through the dense foliage.

Suddenly aware of her, the shadow turned. It tried to run but stumbled against the tangle of underbrush. Yakshini bellowed triumphantly, her wild call freezing the shadow with terror.

The curved asidhenuka held high, Yakshini threw herself onto the shadow. She slammed against the hard form of a large man who swung with fist and hand in a desperate attempt to flee.

Yakshini sliced down with her knife, catching thick cloth and skin. The man screamed in pain and terror, then kicked at Yakshini.

Weakening, Yakshini stumbled and fell back into the brush. Her head spun and she felt a fever pain rising in her. Rising to her feet, she no longer saw

the shadowy man. She heard him – his heavy breath, his feet smashing at the underbrush – but her vision had blurred and she could not see him.

If he were the killer he would get away this day. But she had marked him.

It seemed to take forever for Yakshini to run home. By the time she arrived, the sun was just coming over the horizon, its warm glow snaking through the dense forest. Cookstoves had already been lit; the smell of food cooking perfumed the air. She had but moments to throw herself into her room before someone saw her.

Yakshini rounded the post headquarters and used the waning shadows to hide her movements toward her house. Faithful Chakara had left the window open, but it was with some difficulty that the usually agile and strong Yakshini climbed through it.

Now that she was safely out of view, Millicent felt her fever rising. She had forced it out of her mind on the run home. But now it seemed to take her over.

She discarded her costume, already soaked with fever sweat, and threw herself on her bed.

The movement and creaking of the bed awoke Chakara, who had spent the night in a chair in the dark corner of the room.

"Mistress!" she whispered, fright contorting her face. She fell to Millicent, felt her brow. "You are on fire, Mistress!"

"Poison," Millicent cried, then

fainted.

For hours, Millicent writhed in a painful fever dream. She saw dark shadows bubble out of the ground before her, envelop her in endless blackness and cold. She felt the white-hot pain of a thousand fangs striking at her. Snakeheads disappeared into a mist as she turned toward them, only to strike from somewhere else unseen. She shivered and burned and thrashed about. And then she collapsed, silent and still.

In the absolute stillness of morning, Millicent screamed. She sat up, eyes thrown wide with fear at the site of a horrible, nebulous form before her. She blinked and the figure melted into Eloise Fernhagen, the minister's wife, frozen in terror.

Millicent, seeing the woman, relaxed and slumped back into bed.

Shaking, Eloise caught her breath. "Miss Millicent, can you hear me?"

She nodded. Her words came weakly. "Yes."

Eloise came to the bed, a bowl of water and a towel in hand. She began wiping Millicent's brow with the cool water. Greedily, the girl snatched the towel and washed herself with it, letting the cool water cleanse away the last of the fever heat.

"You've been a terror all night," Eloise said. She propped some pillows to allow Millicent to sit up comfortably. "The doctor should be back soon. And your servant is resting. They've been with you most of the night."

"I'm surprised to see you here,"

Millicent said, strength returning to her voice. "I am grateful."

Eloise's jaw became tense, her face hard. She took the bowl and cloth and returned them to a chiffonier. Atop the tall chest was some cloth torn into strips. Eloise fingered these absently.

"I know I've not been terribly hospitable," she said. "But these are not hospitable lands. Eight years in Africa weren't enough, now we come to this godforsaken place."

Eloise trembled and squeezed at the torn strips of white gauzy material as if it were alive. With sudden nervous clarity, Millicent realized what the woman held was the costume she herself wore as Yakshini.

"But we can't go, can we?" Eloise said, angrily. "Would it hurt so much to have a little music? Or a restaurant? Or friends?"

"Millicent!"

Raymond Pettemayne burst into the room, worry etched into every feature of his rugged face.

"I heard you scream."

"The last of the fever leaving me," she said. Millicent stepped out of bed, the thin blanket wrapped around curving figure.

"Millicent, really!" he exclaimed at the site of his sister.

"Go," she told him, smiling. "I will dress."

"No you won't. You need your rest."

"Nonsense. The fever is gone." She reached out and took Eloise's hand, pulling it away from the costume. "Thank you, Eloise."

Chakara came into the room, eyes red with lack of sleep. She snatched up the costume and tossed into a drawer the moment Eloise left the room. Still stiff, a little tired, Millicent slipped into a loose print frock.

"We thought you dead, Mistress," Chakara said, her voice breathy with awe. "The strange spirit that has plagued us ..."

"It's no spirit, Chakara. The same thing that has killed all of your people poisoned me."

She was surprised to find the American, Maxim, in the dining room when she came out of her bedroom.

"You'll forgive me, I hope. I was concerned and called to see how you were," Stuart Maxim said, rising.

"Much better, thank you."

The breakfast table had been set, her brother already eating. There were three places at the table.

Maxim had worn safari clothes the previous day with a short sleeved shirt that showed off his strong, muscular arms. Today he wore a long sleeved khaki shirt. Millicent noticed a slight bulge on his forearm.

"You should eat," Pettemayne said, rising and offering a chair.

"You'll join us, of course, Mr. Maxim."

"Thank you."

She reached out and took his arm, gently squeezing his forearm as she sat. He said nothing, but his face tensed, reddened in a barely contained grimace.

"It's so rare to find friends in the jungle," Millicent said. "I'm so glad, Mr. Maxim, that you found your way here."

"Well, I've known your brother for years. When I heard he was in Khanna, I detoured to see him."

"But what brings you to India, Mr. Maxim?"

"Business." The word came out flat.

"Oh? Not much industry in the jungle I'm afraid."

"You'll forgive my sister," Pettemayne offered, dishing rice and eggs into Millicent's plate. "She does not understand all the ways a man may make his way in the world."

"I have various ... interests around the world," Maxim said lightly, but his eyes had hardened, become suspicious. "I hope you'll allow me to count you as one of them."

Millicent narrowed her gaze, deepened it.

"Oh, dear. I've forgotten how forward Americans can be," Pettemayne said, blustering a little for his sister's sake.

Millicent had taken no offense, felt no fear. Her jungle cat senses were keen and she held no impression of danger from this man. No physical danger, that is. She suddenly realized her heart was pounding in her chest, felt her face warming.

"Lucky my brother was at the post when you dropped in, else you wouldn't know a soul in camp," she said, watching for Maxim's reaction. He hid it well. He stiffened slightly, his face masking surprise. He was reassessing her,

Millicent knew, and she wondered if she hadn't revealed too much with her playful jibe.

With no preamble, Dr. Frost entered the dining room and took a chair near Millicent. He peered deeply at the girl, looking at her magnificent eyes, touching her cheek, her forehead.

"You are an amazing young woman," he declared. "I'm not sure you should still be alive."

"Doctor, can you tell us anything about what happened to poor Millicent," Pettemayne asked.

"She was poisoned. Any fool could have seen that. You had somehow ingested arsenic!"

"What?!" Maxim shouted. "How would someone get hold of arsenic out here?"

Pettemayne seemed undisturbed by the news. "We use it quite a bit, actually. Quite the vermin problem. She could have come across it any number of ways."

"Yes," the doctor said, not satisfied with Pettemayne's conclusion. "She hadn't taken enough to kill her. I suppose a grain here or there might have made its way into something she ate."

Millicent waved off the incident. "Well, I'll have to be more careful."

"I'll say!" Maxim told her.

Though pleased with the girl's remarkable recovery, the doctor insisted that Millicent return with him to his office for a full examination. Her brother protested, but she went. The examination took only a few minutes

and seemed designed only to get her away from Pettemayne.

"I'm quite all right, aren't I, Dr. Frost?" Millicent asked.

"Yes. Remarkable." He fiddled with his instruments, replacing them in a glass case. He would not look at the girl.

"Doctor, there was more than arsenic you found, wasn't there?"

He nodded. "Cobra venom. Millicent gasped.

"You are damned lucky. That strange concoction is a virulent poison."

He stared at her for several moments, his eye twitching absentmindedly. Then, in a rush, he was upon her. He grabbed her arms, shook her.

"Just what are you up to, young lady?" Surprised by his sudden action, Millicent could say nothing. "I found flecks of blood around your mouth as well. You hadn't bitten yourself."

He let her go, stepped away. "You're playing at some secret, Millicent. A dangerous one. I don't think I could stand it if anything happened to you."

Shock registered in her eyes.

"Oh no," he said, seeing the girl tense with fearful surprise. "You have nothing to worry about on that score. I'm old enough to be your father. And, well, I've never had a daughter, you see, and I've become quite fond of you these past months, and ...

She put a hand to his craggy face and smiled. "Thank you, doctor. But I am quite hale and hearty. I shall be fine."

Millicent left the doctor, promising to return home to rest. Before leaving, though, she asked about Avilash, wondering if the same poisons that had infected her had killed him. Dr. Frost told her the native's death had been caused by those exact same poisons.

The strong sun and fragrant jungle flowers did much to restore Millicent's strength. She basked in the glow and warmth cascading down on the outpost, connecting again with the wilderness. This place was a tonic to her. She had never felt more alive anywhere else in the world.

Across the compound the trader, Simon Eldeman, was putting the final touches on a small safari. Several porters were arranging boxes to carry on their heads; four mules had large sacks thrown across their bare backs. Eldeman bellowed instructions, one arm pointing, the other gripping a long 4-bore Holland & Holland double-barreled elephant gun.

"You don't look dead to me," he said as a curious Millicent approached.

"I thought you were heading inland yesterday."

"Got delayed." Edleman turned back to his crew, a less than cooperative bunch, and scolded them for some transgression. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and on one arm she saw a clean bandage about his bicep.

"Accident?" she asked.

"Scraped against a blasted nail. Damned nice to have a sawbones in town."

In a flash, Millicent came to a deci-

sion.

"I'd like to go with you."

He whirled on her, taken completely by surprise.

"You don't want to be in my company, Miss. I'm pretty low."

She smiled with a bit of mischief in her eyes. "I'll take my chances."

Edleman huffed. "I'm about ready to pull out. I ain't got time to wait for no female to get herself properly dressed."

Millicent said, "Don't worry. When occasion demands, I can change very quickly."

Ten minutes later they were in the jungle beyond sight of Khanna. Millicent had changed into tan breaches, a loose shirt, tall boots, and a pith helmet. The transformation had been as complete as it was swift. She looked the proper British lady ready to conquer the jungle.

Edleman intended to trade with the Onge tribesman for panther and tiger pelts.

"Safer than getting them myself," Edleman said with a hoarse chuckle.

The man had a gross manner, was unkempt, unshaven, dirty. He had a rude quality that kept everyone at a distance. That is, unless they needed something from him.

"You might make more friends," Millicent observed, "if you weren't so vulgar."

Edleman let loose with a laugh that frightened the mules. He turned on them with a riding crop, slapping at their rumps to get them moving again.

They followed a narrow trail. But the jungle intruded at nearly every step. It was slow going.

"What kind of folks you think I deal with? These ain't gentlemen. They're the roughest kind. I'm rough 'cause I have to be. Gets the job done. Gets you the things you need."

Some brush had fallen across the path, halting the group. Edleman pulled a machete out of the scabbard strapped to his hip and began hacking away at the brush. His thick arms swung violently. Finally, their way cleared, he turned back to her.

"Folks ain't satisfied with nothing. They all want something more than what they've got. Keeps me in business."

Edleman started to laugh then stopped, listening. Millicent had heard it, too. A low rumble echoed from seemingly far off. The rest of the jungle had gone silent.

The mules balked and fidgeted nervously. One kicked up its hind legs and brayed wildly. Then another did. The porters became nervous and dropped their boxes, trembling.

Then the jungle parted with a crack and an elephant came screaming through the brush and trees, crushing everything in its path.

5. Spirits of the Dead

THE CRAZED BEAST HAD a wild, red look in its eyes. It stumbled forward, trunk blaring fearfully as it

crashed toward them. Two of the mules bucked frantically, freeing themselves of the burden strapped to their backs, then raced off into the bush. The porters, terror mobilizing them, ran off, back toward Khanna.

Unconsciously, Millicent made to move protectively between the rampaging beast and Edleman, but the gruff trader tossed an arm out and pushed her aside. He swept up his large elephant gun and took aim.

"Wait!" Millicent cried, just before he pulled the trigger.

In its trembling fear, the animal had turned away from the safari and pushed on into the jungle.

"He should tire soon enough," Edleman said, gruffly. "But we'll have to ..."

More thunder shook the ground. Screams echoed ghostlike about them. They seemed surrounded by the horrific sound.

Millicent grabbed Edleman by the arm, surprising the man with her sudden strength. In a few quick strides she led them to a huge gnarled tree that groped twistingly toward the light-shrouding jungle canopy.

In moments, as the terrifying sound grew, Millicent had used the cracks and knots in the tree to scurry up to the first limb, some fifteen off the jungle floor. Not pausing to wonder at the woman's amazing agility and quick thinking, Edleman followed.

The jungle erupted with sound and the fury of a herd of a dozen elephants rampaging uncontrollably. Fear-

stricken, one of the mules raced into the path of the oncoming juggernaut and was crushed to death. The other collapsed behind a tree as gargantuan legs pummeled the earth all around it.

Several elephants, as they raced by, bounced off the tree in which Millicent and Edleman had found refuge. Blinded by fear, one of the beasts slammed head on into it. Millicent, shook loose from her limb, plunged groundward. Her quick right hand grabbed at the tree limb. Edleman snatched her arm at the elbow and pulled up just as another of the beasts passed below. Her feet scraped at the animal's rough hide.

"Thank you," Millicent said, attempting to sound breathless, helpless.

"You surprise me," Edleman said, mild suspicion played across his face.

The elephants had gone, swallowed and muffled by the jungle. They were not heading toward Bhupati and the Onge village, but their fear made them erratic, unpredictable.

"We should hurry," Millicent said.

They spent twenty minutes rounding up two of the four mules and strapping as many boxes as they could to the animals.

Away from the path of destruction passage was difficult and slow, especially with the reticent mules. Edleman led them around several hazards he seemed to have memorized from his many years in India. His knowledge of the jungle, in fact, impressed Millicent. Few knew the jungle that well.

By mid-day they reached the spot where Millicent, as Yakshini, had found Bhupati praying the night before. Edleman paused, curious, uncertain of what he was seeing but sure it held some importance. He glanced back at Millicent.

"The village is just up ahead."

As they pushed through the thick, darkened brush, Millicent caught glimpses of huts made of grass, mud, and tree limbs. Nearly two dozen of them were arranged neatly around several well-trod footpaths. Not a soul was in sight.

Edleman stopped the mules, tied them to a tree. Then he slowly lifted his gun and took a cautious step into the village.

Millicent twitched with nervous excitement. She wanted to throw off her travel garb and slip into her Yakshini costume. Without Edleman she could easily glide through the village as if a will 'o the wisp. But with him there she had to follow his lead – for now.

A murmur rose to their ears and Edleman held out a hand to stop them. Millicent had heard it as well, had already located its origin while the trader still cast about. She smiled at the man. He meant well, was even protective of her. This was not like the gruff trader she had seen in Khanna. There seemed to be something more beneath his surface.

The murmur rose again, and this time Edleman located it.

"Over there," he whispered, pointing. "Second hut on the right."

Millicent nodded, stepping boldly toward the hut. Too late, Edleman moved to stop her, and was forced to follow in her wake.

As she neared the hut a spear thrust out through the grass-covered doorway slicing the air between Millicent and Edleman. Millicent slapped at the weapon then stabbed a hand into the darkened hut. She grabbed hold of a bony arm and pulled an old man from the shadows.

"Do not kill me," he mumbled in an antiquated dialect. Millicent had long ago learned most of the dialects spoken by the jungle tribes. She spoke quickly with the old man then translated for Edleman.

"He was left to guard the village."

"Him alone?"

A sound flicked past Millicent's ears, her trained senses analyzing it instantly.

"Not quite," she said.

The ancient one mumbled feeble protests as Millicent pushed past and on into the hut. Catlike, her eyes adjusted almost immediately. On the floor, wrapped in blankets, sweating and trembling, lay Bhupati.

The old man continued his protests as Millicent knelt beside the fragile-looking tribal shaman. His strong, round face was now gaunt and pale. His hair, once a proud mane shot with a silver streak, was matted with sweat and dirt. He shivered feverishly.

"Leave this village," Bhupati said, tremulously, rising up on an elbow.

Millicent swept up a cloth lying be-

side the man, dipped it into a bowl of water, and wiped the shaman's brow.

"We must get you to a doctor," she said.

Edleman had entered the hut, squinting in the darkness.

"No! I must stay ... defend the village"

"You're sick. You need help."

"Who are you to care for me?" Bhupati asked, falling back against his meager bed.

"I – I live in Khanna ..." Millicent said, feebly.

His eyes, glassy and bloodshot, darkened, deepened for just a moment. She feared for that moment that she had given away her secret. But Bhupati held only suspicion, not knowledge.

"Who are you defending against?" Edleman asked.

"We guard the sacred trust."

"Please tell us. Where did everyone go?" Millicent urged.

"The jungle is cursed these past days. Our people die. The jungle makes horrible sounds. The Onge fear. They abandoned their duty. But I will stay. I will"

Bhupati sank deeper into his bed, silently breathing.

"You should not be here. You are not Onge. You are not Yakshini."

Edleman stepped forward then suddenly stopped. He heard a terrible wailing sound followed by gunshots and thunder.

"Another stampede! We've got to get out of here." Edleman said.

Millicent rose and went quickly to the doorway. She listened intently.

"No," she said. "They are heading off in another direction."

"Why would somebody start an elephant stampede?"

Bhupati lifted onto his elbow again, straining at the Herculean effort. "Ancient, sacred ground. They want ..."

Millicent returned to the shaman and pushed him back onto his blankets.

"Rest," she said, absently caressing his brow.

"I don't like this," Edleman said at the doorway. "You stay with the tribesman. I'm going to take a look at what's going on."

"No!" Millicent called to the trader, as he pushed out of the hut. "It's too dangerous."

She started to rise, but the shaman's hand grabbed hold of her.

"Who are you, woman?" Bhupati asked, suspicion flooding his feverish face.

Rifle in hand, Edleman struck out toward the sound of gunfire and terrified elephants. Alone, he made good time, ever alert to danger.

The sound of rampaging elephants had died off after a while, as had the report of gunshots. A new sound had risen: the sound of men at work. The rasping of saws and the muffled words of strange, violent curses drifted toward Edleman. The trader slowed his pace, increased his vigilance.

Edleman came to a small hill and climbed to its tree-shrouded crest. Be-

low, in a small bowl of a valley were a dozen white men. They stood precariously on oddly twisted strips of white rock that made Edleman think of coral. With saws and axes the men attacked the coral-looking rock, pulling out great man-size chunks of the stuff.

No! Not coral, thought Edleman. Ivory! These men were raiding an elephant burial ground.

Now he understood why the men worked quickly. Although frightened off, the gigantic beasts would return shortly to defend their ground. The Onge tribe and the elephants considered this ground holy and to defile it was sacrilegious, and meant death.

At the far end of the valley the bowl flattened into a narrow pass – wide enough perhaps for two elephants. A stakebed truck sat in the pass now. On it the men piled great chunks of ivory.

A man stood in the bed of the truck, riding crop in his grimy hand, cursing at the workers, urging them to more speed. Edleman recognized the man as Pete Edgars, someone he had fired months ago for cheating him in his dealings with the Onge tribesmen. Some of the workers Edleman recognized as tough men he had hired at one time or another. Edgars turned suddenly and spoke to someone hidden in the shadows. Moments later, the man hopped down from the truck and rushed to join the others in their work.

Edleman watched for long minutes, uncertain what to do. It would take him a day to travel to Khanna and return with Captain Pettemayne and his

soldiers. No one was left in the Onge village to help, and Edleman could not take them all on himself.

The treasure was tremendous. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in ivory lay before him, tempted him. But Edleman had lived in the jungle too long. Although not a religious man, he believed in the lore that protected this trove, and in his way he respected it.

A shadow passed over him suddenly. As he turned a great weight crashed against his head and he dove into blackness.

When he awoke, he was tied to a stake in the middle of the burial ground. He was facing the opening to the valley. With instant clarity, he realized he would be the first thing the elephants would see when they returned – after they saw that their ground had been defiled. A shudder ran through him as he thought about what they would do to him.

Edgars stepped into view, crooked, blackened teeth showing in an evil smile.

“Did ya think ya could take us all on?” the man said, laughing.

“This is wrong, Edgars. The elephants may be dumb beasts but they’re territorial. They’ll kill you if they find you here. And the tribesmen...”

“The boss took care of da Onge, dose superstitious devils. And when da elephants return, you’ll be da only one ta greet them.”

A trumpeting sound rose up from far

off in the jungle. Edgars listened, grinning.

"Looks like dere comin' back now. Been nice knowin' ya, Edleman."

Millicent had stayed long enough for Bhupati to fall into a fitful sleep. Leaving the old man to care for the shaman she left the hut and quickly changed into her Yakshini costume. Taking to the trees she raced after Edleman.

The man had made excellent time. It wasn't until he had been captured that Yakshini caught up with him. She watched from the ridge as Edgars turned away from Edleman, laughing, and waving to the workers. They gathered up armfuls of ivory and made their way toward the truck. A figure in the darkness called out angrily, the sound muffled with distance. Further out, Yakshini could hear the sounds of the returning elephants.

Wraith-like she leapt to the ground and seemed to float over the twisted piles of bone and ivory. Her white costume melted her into the surrounding swirl of white bone and ivory. When she suddenly appeared beside Edleman, he screamed.

"What the hell are you?"

A shot rang out splashing shards of bone all around them.

"Get out of here!" Edleman told Yakshini.

The men were coming back across the pile of bones and ivory, armed with knives. Another shot fired from the truck splashed at their feet, dusting

Edleman and Yakshini with razor-sharp slices of bone. Edleman worked at his bonds frantically.

"I must deal with these men first," Yakshini said icily, then ran toward a knot of men.

Suddenly the ground beneath her shifted violently. A crevasse opened and she plunged twenty feet into dank, matted blackness. Even her catlike reflexes were not enough to stop her fall.

Dazed, Yakshini looked up to see the ugly, grinning face of Edgars. He shook his head then kicked a pile of bones down on top of her. When she looked up again, he was gone.

The muffled voices of the ivory thieves faded as the sounds of approaching elephants grew. In minutes the great beasts would arrive and find Edleman. They would gore the man to death. And Yakshini would be buried alive under the gargantuan feet of the beasts.

Quickly, Yakshini surveyed her would-be grave. The narrow, dank hole was studded with bones and matted with decaying jungle matter: branches, leaves, vines, and small animals dead beneath the crushing weight of bone and ivory.

Grimly determined, Yakshini dug her hands and feet into the shifting muck, using bone and limbs to pull herself up. Relentlessly she climbed. Footholds crumbled under her weight. Desperately she clung to the merest handhold and dragged herself upward. Bones scraped her legs raw, slapped at

her masked face, tore at her gossamer costume.

When she emerged, she was a grimy wraith full of vengeance. With barely a pause, she flashed her asidhenuka and cut through Edleman's bonds with the curved blade.

"Get out of the valley!" she ordered.

At the entrance to the valley, the men were climbing onto the truck, ready to leave with their ill-gotten gains. With amazing speed, Yakshini raced across the tenuous ground. In moments she had reached the truck and began cutting through the men like so much cordwood.

Surprised by her sudden and violent appearance, the men abandoned the truck and ran into the jungle. The truck lurched forward as another of the men, Edgars, threw himself out of the truck cab.

Yakshini climbed to the top of the cab as the truck bounced roughly out of the valley entrance. She spared a moment to glance back. Edgars, machete in hand, charged Edleman. The two men met in a mighty clash of steel and muscle.

The truck lurched again as it struck a hole, throwing Yakshini onto the hood of the cab. The driver raised an old Webley .455 and blasted the windshield. Yakshini rolled even as the truck came to a stop.

Her momentum carried her off the truck hood. Airborne, she grabbed the rearview mirror and with a titanic pull arced in through the open truck window. Her jungle toughened feet struck

the driver as a second shot was fired wildly.

With a scream, the driver fell out of the truck and into the path of the oncoming elephants. Utterly shocked, Yakshini saw that the mastermind of the horrible deaths was the minister's wife, Eloise Fernhagen!

Cursing the wraith before her, Eloise raised the Webley again, blind to the charging beasts.

Yakshini dove from the cab, slapping aside the weapon. She grabbed the woman and tossed her over the truck, out of harm's way.

"I'll kill you!" Eloise cried, insanely.

The herd had seen them and trumpeted angrily. Yakshini floated over the hood of the truck, scooped up the woman, and ran for the safety of the trees. Blinded by the dust of their passing Yakshini could not see if Edleman had escaped the valley.

"Why?" Yakshini asked, pinning the woman to a tree.

"I hate the jungle! The savages, the filth! I could have escaped! With the ivory I could have left it all behind! The



jungle and that simpering husband of mine!”

“You will pay for your crimes, woman.”

“Never!”

Swatting violently, Eloise knocked Yakshini aside and plunged into the jungle. A moment later the woman’s horrified scream filled the air. Yakshini ran to her but stopped short. Eloise lay at the bottom of a shallow hole, her eyes already glassy and dim. A half dozen cobras struck repeatedly at her lifeless body.

Yakshini turned away, her stomach knotted. She climbed a tree and searched for Edleman. The man had proven himself. She hoped he wasn’t dead.

Across the valley she finally saw him, rumpled, bloody, but alive. He was climbing out of the valley. He spied her in the distance, and caught up short. A moment later she was gone.

Captain Raymond Pettemayne arrived at the Onge village the next

morning at the head of a well-armed column. Millicent was waiting for them at Bhupati’s side. The shaman was on the mend and refused to leave his village. His fellow tribesman would return, he said, and they would resume their sacred trust.

There was a moment when his eyes, now clear of fever and once again deep and dark, gazed penetratingly at Millicent. What did he know, she wondered? What did he feel? For days after, she found her thoughts lingering on him. Not just his suspicion of her, but him. He had stirred something in her.

That was for another time, she told herself. For now she would rejoice in the warmth of the sun, the fragrant smell of camphor, the comforting sounds of the jungle – and in knowing that a terrible curse had been lifted from her home.

THE END

